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THE HATING GAME

A NOVEL

SALLY
THORNE



THE
HATING
GAME

SALLY THORNE

wm

WILLIAM MORROW

An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Dedication

In loving memory of Ivy Stone

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Dedication

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An Excerpt from *The Comfort Zone*

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Chapter 1

I have a theory. Hating someone feels disturbingly similar to being in love with them. I've had a lot of time to compare love and hate, and these are my observations.

Love and hate are visceral. Your stomach twists at the thought of that person. The heart in your chest beats heavy and bright, nearly visible through your flesh and clothes. Your appetite and sleep are shredded. Every interaction spikes your blood with a dangerous kind of adrenaline, and you're on the brink of fight or flight. Your body is barely under your control. You're consumed, and it scares you.

Both love and hate are mirror versions of the same game—and you *have* to win. Why? Your heart and your ego. Trust me, I should know.

It's early Friday afternoon. I'm imprisoned at my desk for another few hours. I wish I was in solitary confinement, but unfortunately I have a cellmate. Each tick of his watch feels like another tally mark, chipped onto the cell wall.

We're engaged in one of our childish games, which requires no words. Like everything we do, it's dreadfully immature.

The first thing to know about me: My name is Lucy Hutton. I'm the executive assistant to Helene Pascal, the co-CEO of Bexley & Gamin.

Once upon a time, our little Gamin Publishing was on the brink of collapse. The reality of the economy meant people had no money for their mortgage repayments and literature was a luxury. Bookstores were closing all over the city like candles being blown out. We braced ourselves for almost certain closure.

At the eleventh hour, a deal was struck with another struggling publishing house. Gamin Publishing was forced into an arranged marriage with the crumbling evil empire known as Bexley Books, ruled by the unbearable Mr. Bexley himself.

Each company stubbornly believing it was saving the other, they both packed up and moved into their new marital home. Neither party was

remotely happy about it. The Bexleys remembered their old lunchroom foosball table with sepia-tinted nostalgia. They couldn't believe the airy-fairy Gamins had survived even this long, with their lax adherence to key performance indicator targets and dreamy insistence on Literature as Art. The Bexleys believed numbers were more important than words. Books were units. Sell the units. High-five the team. Repeat.

The Gamins shuddered in horror watching their boisterous new stepbrothers practically tearing the pages out of their Brontës and Austens. How had Bexley managed to amass so many like-minded stuffed shirts, far more suited to accountancy or law? Gamins resented the notion of books as units. Books were, and always would be, something a little magic and something to respect.

One year on, you can still tell at a glance which company someone came from by his or her physical appearance. The Bexleys are hard geometrics, the Gamins are soft scribbles. Bexleys move in shark packs, talking figures and constantly hogging the conference rooms for their ominous Planning Sessions. Plotting sessions, more like. Gamins huddle in their cubicles, gentle doves in clock towers, poring over manuscripts, searching for the next literary sensation. The air surrounding them is perfumed with jasmine tea and paper. Shakespeare is their pinup boy.

The move to a new building was a little traumatizing, especially for the Gamins. Take a map of this city. Make a straight line between each of the old company buildings, mark a red dot exactly halfway between them and here we are. The new Bexley & Gamin is a cheap gray cement toad squatting on a major traffic route, impossible to merge onto in the afternoon. It's arctic in the morning shadows and sweaty by the afternoon. The building has one redeeming feature: Some basement parking—usually snagged by the early risers, or should I say, the Bexleys.

Helene Pascal and Mr. Bexley had toured the building prior to the move and a rare thing happened: They both agreed on something. The top floor of the building was an insult. Only one executive office? A total refit was needed.

After an hour-long brainstorm that was filled with so much hostility the interior designer's eyes sparkled with unshed tears, the only word Helene and Mr. Bexley would agree on to describe the new aesthetic was *shiny*. It was their last agreement, ever. The refit definitely fulfilled the design brief. The tenth floor is now a cube of glass, chrome, and black tile. You could pluck your eyebrows using any surface as a mirror—walls,

floors, ceiling. Even our desks are made from huge sheets of glass.

I'm focused on the great big reflection opposite me. I raise my hand and look at my nails. My reflection follows. I stroke through my hair and straighten my collar. I've been in a trance. I'd almost forgotten I'm still playing this game with Joshua.

I'm sitting here with a cellmate because every power-crazed war general has a second in command to do the dirty work. Sharing an assistant was never an option, because it would have required a concession from one of the CEOs. We were each plugged in outside the two new office doors, and left to fend for ourselves.

It was like being pushed into the Colosseum's arena, only to find I wasn't alone.

I raise my right hand again now. My reflection follows smoothly. I rest my chin on my palm and sigh deeply, and it resonates and echoes. I raise my left eyebrow because I know he can't, and as predicted his forehead pinches uselessly. I've won the game. The thrill does not translate into an expression on my face. I remain as placid and expressionless as a doll. We sit here with our chins on our hands and stare into each other's eyes.

I'm never alone in here. Sitting opposite me is the executive assistant to Mr. Bexley. His henchman and manservant. The second thing, the most *essential* thing anyone needs to know about me, is this: I hate Joshua Templeman.

He's currently copying every move I make. It's the Mirror Game. To the casual observer it wouldn't be immediately obvious; he's as subtle as a shadow. But not to me. Each movement of mine is replicated on his side of the office on a slight time delay. I lift my chin from my palm and swivel to my desk, and smoothly he does the same. I'm twenty-eight years old and it seems I've fallen through the cracks of heaven and hell and into purgatory. A kindergarten classroom. An asylum.

I type my password: IHATEJOSHUA4EV@. My previous passwords have all been variations on how much I hate Joshua. For Ever. His password is almost certainly IHateLucinda4Eva. My phone rings. Julie Atkins, from copyrights and permissions, another thorn in my side. I feel like unplugging my phone and throwing it into an incinerator.

"Hello, how are you?" I always put an extra little bit of warmth into my voice on the phone. Across the room, Joshua's eyes roll as he begins punishing his keyboard.

"I have a favor to ask, Lucy." I can almost mouth the next words as she

speaks them.

“I need an extension on the monthly report. I think I’m getting a migraine. I can’t look at this screen any longer.” She’s one of those horrific people who pronounces it *me-graine*.

“Of course, I understand. When can you get it done?”

“You’re the best. It’d be in by Monday afternoon. I need to come in late.”

If I say yes, I’ll have to stay late Monday night to have the report done for Tuesday’s nine A.M. executive meeting. Already, next week sucks.

“Okay.” My stomach feels tight. “As soon as you can, please.”

“Oh, and Brian can’t get his in today either. You’re so nice. I appreciate how kind you’re being. We were all saying you’re the best person to deal with up there in exec. *Some people* up there are total nightmares.” Her sugary words help ease the resentment a little.

“No problem. Talk to you Monday.” I hang up and don’t even need to look at Joshua. I know he’s shaking his head.

After a few minutes I glance at him, and he is staring at me. Imagine it’s two minutes before the biggest interview of your life, and you look down at your white shirt. Your peacock-blue fountain pen has leaked through your pocket. Your head explodes with an obscenity and your stomach is a spike of panic over the simmering nerves. You’re an idiot and everything’s ruined. That’s the exact color of Joshua’s eyes when he looks at me.

I wish I could say he’s ugly. He should be a short, fat troll, with a cleft palate and watery eyes. A limping hunchback. Warts and zits. Yellow-cheese teeth and onion sweat. But he’s not. He’s pretty much the opposite. More proof there’s no justice in this world.

My inbox pings. I flick my eyes abruptly away from Joshua’s non-ugliness and notice Helene has sent through a request for budget forecasting figures. I open up last month’s report for reference and begin.

I doubt this month’s outlook is going to be much of an improvement. The publishing industry is sliding further downhill. I’ve heard the word *restructure* echoing a few times around these halls, and I know where that leads. Every time I step out of the elevator and see Joshua I ask myself: Why I don’t get a new job?

I’ve been fascinated by publishing houses since a pivotal field trip when I was eleven. I was already a passionate devourer of books. My life revolved around the weekly trip to the town library. I’d borrow the

maximum number of titles allowed and I could identify individual librarians by the sound their shoes made as they moved up each aisle. Until that field trip, I was hell-bent on being a librarian myself. I'd even implemented a cataloging system for my own personal collection. I was such a little book nerd.

Before our trip to the publishing house, I'd never thought much about how a book came to actually exist. It was a revelation. You could be paid to find authors, read books, and ultimately create them? Brand-new covers and perfect pages with no dog-ears or pencil annotations? My mind was blown. I loved new books. They were my favorite to borrow. I told my parents when I got home, *I'm going to work at a publisher when I grow up.*

It's great that I'm fulfilling a childhood dream. But if I'm honest, at the moment the main reason I don't get a new job is: I can't let Joshua win this.

As I work, all I can hear are his machine-gun keystrokes and the faint whistle of air conditioning. He occasionally picks up his calculator and taps on it. I wouldn't mind betting Mr. Bexley has also directed Joshua to run the forecasting figures. Then the two co-CEOs can march into battle, armed with numbers that may not match. The ideal fuel for their bonfire of hatred.

"Excuse me, Joshua."

He doesn't acknowledge me for a full minute. His keystrokes intensify. Beethoven on a piano has nothing on him right now.

"What is it, Lucinda?"

Not even my parents call me Lucinda. I clench my jaw but then guiltily release the muscles. My dentist has begged me to make a conscious effort.

"Are you working on the forecasting figures for next quarter?"

He lifts both hands from his keyboard and stares at me. "No."

I let out half a lungful of air and turn back to my desk.

"I finished those two hours ago." He resumes typing. I look at my open spreadsheet and count to ten.

We both work fast and have reputations for being Finishers—you know, the type of worker who completes the nasty, too-hard tasks everyone else avoids.

I prefer to sit down with people and discuss things face-to-face. Joshua is strictly email. At the foot of his emails is always: Rgds, J. Would it kill him to type Regards, Joshua? It's too many keystrokes, apparently. He

probably knows offhand how many minutes a year he's saving B&G.

We're evenly matched, but we are completely at odds. I try my hardest to look corporate but everything I own is slightly wrong for B&G. I'm a Gamin to the bone. My lipstick is too red, my hair too unruly. My shoes click too loudly on the tile floors. I can't seem to hand over my credit card to purchase a black suit. I never had to wear one at Gamin, and I'm stubbornly refusing to assimilate with the Bexleys. My wardrobe is knits and retro. A sort of cool librarian chic, I hope.

It takes me forty-five minutes to complete the task. I race the clock, even though numbers are not my forte, because I imagine it would have taken Joshua an hour. Even in my head I compete with him.

"Thanks, Lucy!" I hear Helene call faintly from behind her shiny office door when I send the document through.

I recheck my inbox. Everything's up to date. I check the clock. Three fifteen P.M. I check my lipstick in the reflection of the shiny wall tile near my computer monitor. I check Joshua, who is glowering at me with contempt. I stare back. Now we are playing the Staring Game.

I should mention that the ultimate aim of all our games is to make the other smile, or cry. It's something like that. I'll know when I win.

I made a mistake when I first met Joshua: I smiled at him. My best sunny smile with all my teeth, my eyes sparkling with stupid optimism that the business merger wasn't the worst thing to ever happen to me. His eyes scanned me from the top of my head to the soles of my shoes. I'm only five feet tall so it didn't take long. Then he looked away out the window. He did not smile back, and somehow I feel like he's been carrying my smile around in his breast pocket ever since. He's one up. After our initial poor start, it only took a few weeks for us to succumb to our mutual hostility. Like water dripping into a bathtub, eventually it began to overflow.

I yawn behind my hand and look at Joshua's breast pocket, resting against his left pectoral. He wears an identical business shirt every day, in a different color. White, off-white stripe, cream, pale yellow, mustard, baby blue, robin's-egg blue, dove-gray, navy, and black. They are worn in their unchanging sequence.

Incidentally, my favorite of his shirts is robin's-egg blue, and my least favorite is mustard, which he is wearing now. All the shirts look fine on him. All colors suit him. If I wore mustard, I'd look like a cadaver. But there he sits, looking as golden-skinned and healthy as ever.

“Mustard today,” I observe aloud. Why do I poke the hornet’s nest? “Just can’t wait for baby blue on Monday.”

The look he gives me is both smug and irritated. “You notice so much about me, Shortcake. But can I remind you that comments about appearance are against the B&G human resources policy.”

Ah, the HR Game. We haven’t played this one in ages. “Stop calling me Shortcake or I’ll report you to HR.”

We each keep a log on the other. I can only assume he does; he seems to remember all of my transgressions. Mine is a password-protected document hidden on my personal drive and it journals all the shit that has ever gone down between Joshua Templeman and me. We have each complained to HR four times over this past year.

He’s received a verbal and written warning about the nickname he has for me. I’ve received two warnings; one for verbal abuse and for a juvenile prank that got out of hand. I’m not proud.

He cannot seem to formulate a reply and we resume staring at each other.

I LOOK FORWARD to Joshua’s shirts getting darker. It’s navy today, which leads to black. Gorgeous Payday Black.

My finances are something like this. I’m about to walk twenty-five minutes from B&G to pick up my car from Jerry (“the Mechanic”) and melt my credit card to within one inch of its maximum limit. Payday comes tomorrow and I will pay the credit card balance. My car will ooze more oily dark stuff all weekend, which I will notice by the time Joshua’s shirts are the white of a unicorn’s flank. I call Jerry. I return the car and subsist on a shoestring budget. The shirts get darker. I’ve got to do something about that car.

Joshua is currently leaning on Mr. Bexley’s doorframe. His body fills most of the doorway. I can see this because I’m spying via the reflection on the wall near my monitor. I hear a husky, soft laugh, nothing like Mr. Bexley’s donkey bray. I rub my palms down my forearms to flatten the tiny hairs. I will not turn my head to try to see properly. He’ll catch me. He always does. Then I’ll get a frown.

The clock is grinding slowly toward five P.M. and I can see thunderclouds through the dusty windows. Helene left an hour ago—one of the perks of being co-CEO is working the hours of a schoolchild and delegating everything to me. Mr. Bexley spends longer hours here because

his chair is way too comfortable and when the afternoon sun slants in, he tends to doze.

I don't mean to sound like Joshua and I are running the top floor, but frankly it feels like it sometimes. The finance and sales teams report directly to Joshua and he filters the huge amounts of data into a bite-size report that he spoon-feeds to a struggling, red-faced Mr. Bexley.

I have the editorial, corporate, and marketing teams reporting to me, and each month I condense their monthly reports into one for Helene . . . and I suppose I spoon-feed it to her too. I spiral-bind it so she can read it when she's on the stepper. I use her favorite font. Every day here is a challenge, a privilege, a sacrifice, and a frustration. But when I think about every little step I've taken to be here in this place, starting from when I was eleven years old, I refocus. I remember. And I endure Joshua for a little longer.

I bring homemade cakes to my meetings with the division heads and they all adore me. I'm described as "worth my weight in gold." Joshua brings bad news to his divisional meetings and his weight is measured in other substances.

Mr. Bexley stumps past my desk now, briefcase in hand. He must shop at Humpty Dumpty's Big & Small Menswear. How else could he find such short, broad suits? He's balding, liver-spotted, and rich as sin. His grandfather started Bexley Books. He loves to remind Helene that she was merely *hired*. He is an old degenerate, according to both Helene and my own private observations. I make myself smile up at him. His first name is Richard. Fat Little Dick.

"Good night, Mr. Bexley."

"Good night, Lucy." He pauses by my desk to look down the front of my red silk blouse.

"I hope Joshua passed on the copy of *The Glass Darkly* I picked up for you? The first of the first."

Fat Little Dick has a huge bookshelf filled with every B&G release. Each book is the first off the press; a tradition started by his grandfather. He loves to brag about them to visitors, but I once looked at the shelves and the spines weren't even cracked.

"You picked it up, eh?" Mr. Bexley orbits around to look at Joshua. "You didn't mention that, Doctor Josh."

Fat Little Dick probably calls him *Doctor Josh* because he's so clinical. I heard someone say when things got particularly bad at Bexley

Books, Joshua masterminded the surgical removal of one-third of their workforce. I don't know how he sleeps at night.

"As long as you get it, it doesn't matter," Joshua replies smoothly and his boss remembers that he is The Boss.

"Yes, yes," he chuffs and looks down my top again. "Good work, you pair."

He gets into the elevator and I look down at my shirt. All the buttons are done up. What could he even *see*? I glance up at the mirrored tiles on the ceiling and can faintly see a tiny triangle of shadowed cleavage.

"If you buttoned it any higher, we wouldn't see your face," Joshua says to his computer screen as he logs off.

"Perhaps you could tell your boss to look at my face occasionally." I also log off.

"He's probably trying to see your circuit board. Or wondering what kind of fuel you run on."

I shrug on my coat. "Just fueled by my hate for you."

Josh's mouth twitches once, and I nearly had him there. I watch him roll down a neutral expression. "If it bothers you, *you* should speak to him. Stand up for yourself. So, painting your nails tonight, desperately alone?"

Lucky guess on his part? "Yes. Masturbating and crying into your pillow tonight, *Doctor Josh*?"

He looks at the top button of my shirt. "Yes. And don't call me that."

I swallow down a bubble of laughter. We jostle each other in an unfriendly way as we get into the elevator. He hits B, but I hit G.

"Hitchhiking?"

"Car's at the shop." I step into my ballet flats and tuck my heels into my bag. Now I'm even shorter. In the dull polish of the elevator doors I can see that I barely come halfway up his bicep. I look like a Chihuahua next to a Great Dane.

The elevator doors open to the building foyer. The world outside B&G is a blue haze; refrigerator cold, filled with rapists and murderers and lightly sprinkling rain. A sheet of newspaper blows past, right on cue.

He holds the elevator door open with one enormous hand and leans out to look at the weather. Then he swings those dark blue eyes to mine, his brow beginning to crease. The familiar bubble forms in my head. *I wish he was my friend*. I burst it with a pin.

"I'll give you a ride," he forces out.

"Ugh, no way," I say over my shoulder and run.

Chapter 2

It's Cream Shirt Wednesday. Joshua is off on a late lunch. He's made a few more comments to me lately about things I like and do. They have been so accurate I'm pretty sure he's been snooping through my stuff. Knowledge is power, and I don't have much.

First, I conduct a forensic examination of my desk. Both Helene and Mr. Bexley despise computerized calendars, and so we have to keep matching paper schedule books like we're Dickensian law clerks. In mine, there's only Helene's appointments. I obsessively lock my computer, even if I go to the printer. My unlocked computer in the vicinity of Joshua? I may as well hand him the nuclear codes now.

Back at Gamin Publishing, my desk was a fort made of books. I kept my pens in the gaps between their spines. When I was unpacking in the new office, I saw how sterile Joshua kept his desk and felt incredibly childish. I took my Word of the Day calendar and Smurf figurines home again.

Before the merger, I had a best friend at work. Val Stone and I would sit on the worn-out leather couches in the break room and play our favorite game: systematically defacing photographs of beautiful people in magazines. I'd add a moustache onto Naomi Campbell. Val would then ink out a missing tooth. Soon it was an onslaught of scars and eye patches and bloodshot eyes and devil horns until the picture was so ruined we'd get bored and start another.

Val was one of the staff who was cut and she was furious I didn't give her some kind of a warning. Not that I would have been allowed to, even if I had known. She didn't believe me. I turn slowly, and my reflection spins off twenty different surfaces. I see myself in every size from music box to silver screen. My cherry-red skirt flips out and I pirouette again once, just for the hell of it, trying to shake away the sick, troubled feeling I get whenever I think of Val.

Anyway, my audit confirms that my desk has a red, black, and blue

pen. Pink Post-its. One tube of lipstick. A box of tissues for blotting my lipstick and tears of frustration. My planner. Nothing else.

I do a light shuffling tap dance across the marble superhighway. I'm in Joshua Country now. I sit in his chair and look at everything through his eyes. His chair is so high my toes don't touch the ground. I wiggle my butt a little deeper into the leather. It feels completely obscene. I keep one eye permanently swiveled toward the elevator, and use the other to examine his desk for clues.

His desk is the male version of mine. Blue Post-its. He has a sharp pencil in with his three pens. Instead of lipstick he has a tin of mints. I steal one and put it in the tiny, previously useless pocket of my skirt. I imagine myself in the laxative section of the drugstore trying to find a good match and have a good little snicker. I jiggle his desk drawer. Locked. So is his computer. Fort Knox. Well played, Templeman. I make a few unsuccessful guesses at his password. Maybe he doesn't hate me 4 eva.

There's no little framed photo of a partner or loved one on this desk. No grinning, happy dog or tropical beach memento. I doubt he esteems anyone enough to frame their likeness. During one of Joshua's fervent little sales rants, Fat Little Dick boomed sarcastically, *We've got to get you laid, Doctor Josh.*

Joshua replied, *You're right, boss. I've seen what a bad drought can do to someone.* He said it while looking at me. I know the date. I diarized it in my HR log.

I get a little tingle in my nostrils. Joshua's cologne? The pheromone he leaches from his pores? Gross. I flip open his day planner and notice something; a light code of pencil running down the columns of each day. Feeling incredibly James Bond-ish, I raise my phone and manage to take one single frame.

I hear the cables in the elevator shaft and leap to my feet. I vault to the other side of his desk and manage to slam the planner shut before the doors spring open and he appears. His chair is still spinning gently out of the corner of my eye. Busted.

"What are you doing?"

My phone is now safely down the waistband of my underwear. Note to self: Disinfect phone.

"Nothing." There's a tremor in my voice, convicting me instantly. "I was trying to see if it's going to rain this afternoon. I bumped your chair.

Sorry.”

He advances like a floating Dracula. The menace is ruined by the sporting-goods-store bag loudly crinkling against his leg. A shoebox is in it, judging from the shape.

Imagine the wretched sales assistant who had to help Joshua choose shoes. *I require shoes to ensure I can effectively run down the targets I am paid to assassinate in my spare time. I require the best value for my money. I am size eleven.*

He looks at his desk, his computer’s innocuous log-in screen, his closed planner. I force my breath out in a controlled hiss. Joshua drops his bag on the floor. He steps so close his leather shoe touches the tip of my little patent heels.

“Now why don’t you tell me what you were actually doing near my desk?”

We have never done the Staring Game this close. I’m a pip-squeak at exactly five feet tall. It’s been my lifelong cross to bear. My lack of height is an agonizing topic of conversation. Joshua is at least six-four. Five. Six. Maybe more. A giant of a human. And he’s built out of heavy materials.

Gamely, I maintain eye contact. I can stand wherever I like in this office. Screw him. Like a threatened animal trying to look bigger, I put my hands on my hips.

He’s not ugly, as I’ve mentioned, but I always struggle to work out how to describe him. I remember eating my dinner on the couch a while back, and a soft-news piece came on the TV. An old Superman comic book sold for a record price at auction. As the white-gloved hand turned the pages, the old-fashioned drawings of Clark Kent reminded me of Joshua.

Like Clark Kent, Joshua’s height and strength are all tucked away under clothes designed to conceal and help him blend into a crowd. Nobody at the *Daily Planet* knows anything about Clark. Underneath these button-up shirts, Joshua could be relatively featureless or ripped like Superman. It’s a mystery.

He doesn’t have the forehead curl or the nerdy black glasses, but he’s got the strong masculine jawline and sulky, pretty mouth. I’ve been thinking all this time his hair is black but now that I’m closer, I can see it is dark brown. He doesn’t comb it as neatly as Clark does. He’s definitely got the ink-blue eyes and the laser stare, and probably some of the other superpowers, too.

But Clark Kent is such a darling; all bumbling and soft. Joshua is hardly the mild-mannered reporter. He's a sarcastic, cynical, Bizarro Clark Kent, terrorizing everyone in the newsroom and pissing off poor little Lois Lane until she screams into her pillow at night.

I don't like big guys. They're too much like horses. They could trample you if you got underfoot. He is auditing my appearance with the same narrowed eyes that I am. I wonder what the top of my head looks like. I'm sure he only fornicates with Amazons. Our stares clash and maybe comparing them to an ink stain was a tad too harsh. Those eyes are wasted on him.

To avoid dying, I reluctantly breathe in a steady lungful of cedar-pine spice. He smells like a freshly sharpened pencil. A Christmas tree in a cold, dark room. Despite the tendons in my neck beginning to cramp, I don't permit myself to lower my eyes. I might look at his mouth then, and I get a good enough view of his mouth when he's tossing insults at me across the office. Why would I want to see it up close? I wouldn't.

The elevator bings like the answer to all my prayers. Enter Andy the courier.

Andy looks like a movie extra who appears in the credits as "Courier." Leathery, midforties, clad in fluorescent yellow. His sunglasses sit like a tiara on top of his head. Like most couriers, he enriches his workday by flirting with every female under the age of sixty he encounters.

"Lovely Luce!" He booms it so loud I hear Fat Little Dick make a wet snort as he jolts awake in his office.

"Andy!" I return, skittering backward. I could honestly hug him for interrupting what was feeling like a whole new kind of strange game. He has a small parcel in his hand, no bigger than a Rubik's cube. It's got to be my 1984 baseball-player Smurfette. Super rare, very minty. I've wanted her forever and I've been stalking her journey via her tracking number.

"I know you want me to call from the foyer with your Smurfs, but no answer."

My desk phone is diverted to my personal cell, which is currently located near my hip bone in the waistband of my underwear. So that's what the buzzing feeling was. Phew. I was thinking I needed my head checked.

"What does he mean, Smurfs?" Joshua narrows his eyes like we're nuts.

"I'm sure you're busy, Andy, I'll let you get out of here." I grab at the

parcel, but it's too late.

"It's her passion in life. She lives and breathes Smurfs. Those little blue people, yea big. They wear white hats." Andy holds two of his fingers an inch apart.

"I know what Smurfs are." Joshua is irritated.

"I don't live or breathe them." My voice betrays the lie. Joshua's sudden cough sounds suspiciously like a laugh.

"Smurfs, huh? So that's what those little boxes are. I thought maybe you were buying your tiny clothes online. Do you think it's appropriate to get personal items delivered to your workplace, Lucinda?"

"She's got a whole cabinet of them. She's got a . . . What is it, Luce? A Thomas Edison Smurf? He's a rare one, Josh. Her parents gave it to her for high school graduation." Andy blithely continues humiliating me.

"Quiet now, Andy! How are you? How's your day going?" I sign for the package on his handheld device with a sweaty hand. Him and his big mouth.

"Your parents bought you a Smurf for graduation?" Joshua lounges in his chair and watches me with cynical interest. I hope my body didn't warm the leather.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm sure you got a car or something." I'm mortified.

"I'm fine, sweetheart," Andy tells me, taking the little gizmo back from me and hitting several buttons and putting it in his pocket. Now that the business component of our interaction is completed, he pulls his mouth into a beguiling grin.

"All the better for seeing you. I tell you, Josh my friend, if I sat opposite this gorgeous little creature I wouldn't get any work done."

Andy hooks his thumbs into his pockets and smiles at me. I don't want to hurt his feelings so I roll my eyes good-humoredly.

"It's a struggle," Joshua says sarcastically. "Be glad you get to leave."

"He must have a heart of stone."

"He sure does. If I can knock him out and get him into a crate, can you have him delivered somewhere remote?" I lean on my desk and look at my tiny parcel.

"International shipping rates have increased," Andy warns. Joshua shakes his head, bored with the conversation, and begins to log on.

"I've got some savings. I think Joshua would love an adventure vacation in Zimbabwe."

"You've got an evil streak, haven't you!" Andy's pocket makes a beep